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The American School

By ARTHUR EDWIN BYE

“**A**MERICA is constantly striving for its own national art and in time it will come, but for many years we shall have to find our chief inspiration in Holland and in Italy, and especially in France.”

This remark was made at the International Art Congress in Paris last year by one of our most distinguished women painters, Miss Cecilia Beaux. It was probably made out of courtesy to her French hosts. But whether or not this was the case, the inferred disparagement of American art aroused a storm of comment from writers in the American art press. Most of this comment has been indignant protest. Some of it has been appreciative support of Miss Beaux. But little of it has shown any serious analysis of American art, nor has anyone discussed the question of what a national art is or why it should necessarily exist.

It is very easy to talk about national art. We refer constantly to Italian art, Dutch art, or French art. But what do we mean? Doubtless by Italian art we mean that of the Renaissance. But to one who knows the art of the Italian Renaissance, the term “national” applied to it is ridiculous. Nationalism in the Italian Renaissance! Italy “constantly striving for its own national art,” as America today is said to be doing! It was a mere dream of idealists. We mean, really, Sienese or Florentine, or perhaps Venetian art, and we lump these various schools together for the convenience of loose thinking. Let us then, once for all, abolish the idea of national Italian art, for such an art never existed.

Nevertheless, the question forces itself upon us, is there perhaps something common to all the Italian schools which distinguishes them from the schools of other countries, something that has nothing to do with nationalism, but

rather with the culture of Latin peoples? Yes, there is this something.

We can find this only by reviewing the history of Italian art. Then we learn that Italian art, whether of Siena, of Florence, or of Venice, was the result of a long process. Byzantine art, after eight hundred years, had spent itself by the thirteenth century. Gothic art and Saracenic art, the two other mediæval influences on art in Italy, were felt to be foreign invasions. Then artists turned back to classic Rome. Whatever may be the differences between the various Italian schools, there is always that background of the Byzantine and the classic. The Italians were, after all, descendants of ancient Rome, and the inheritors of the ideals of classic art. They could not escape. Whatever there may have been of conscious struggle, this influence overpowered all. Whatever there may have been of new vision, classic idealism illuminated and glorified all Italian art. Whether we think of Giotto, of Raphael, or of Giorgione, one idea unites them in our minds—their classic sublimity. They present to us an ordered world above reality.

There is something, then, about an Italian painting by which we always recognize it as such, perhaps its reminder of a Greek metope in its system of spaces, or perhaps its suggestion of a Latin poem.

Now, what do we mean by Dutch art? Again, only historic influences can explain it. Here, in the north, we find an art not derived from classic times, but from the Middle Ages only. No philosophy nor science, like those of ancient Greece and Rome, nor hieratic religion binds art to its service. We find Netherlandish art derived from the naturalism of the Middle Ages. Just as the mediæval wood carver filled his choir stalls with grotesque figures, satires on life, just as the illuminator filled his calendars with scenes of feasting and holiday-making, so the seventeenth century painters portrayed the land they lived in and their fellow countrymen. Whatever differences there may have been between the schools of Bruges and Haarlem, Antwerp and Amsterdam, whether we think of Robert Campin or Pieter Breughel, Rembrandt or Meindert

Hobbema, there is one likeness between them all: nature and human life are presented to us realistically.

Can we also characterize French art in such a way? Not so easily, for French art is the result of a conflict of two influences, the Italian classic, the academic, on the one hand, combatted by the Flemish-Dutch naturalism on the other. The history of French art is a history of this warfare. We might also put it this way: Of the two factors, the Italian academic is the soil; the Netherlandish realism is the plant which struggles upon it; the fruit is French imagination. But no matter how described, French art is the result of historic influences; and whenever the two forces are harmoniously combined, we find great imagination, an inward sympathy for facts, a great freedom of fancy. Watteau was the supreme example of this harmonious blending, and his art seems to me to be peculiarly French.

There is another powerful influence beside that of historic tradition, which has always worked to produce a nation's art, that of climate or geography. Perhaps this is the fundamental cause of everything national, producing national temperament, certainly a national architecture. Why did Italy adhere to her basilical style? It was partly, no doubt, because of its classical character, but also, doubtless, because of its suitability to her climate. If so, then climatic conditions produced the frescoed wall and the mosaic apse. Why did France produce the Gothic cathedral? Was it not the result of the architectural problem of how to admit more light and shed more rain? If so, then climate produced the soaring vault and the stained glass window.

So much for the general characteristics of a nation's art, but what about genius? Is genius the result of blind causes over which men have no control? No, there seem to be men who, singly and alone, defy tradition and circumstance, and change the course of succeeding art. Is this true? How are we to account for the Giotto's, the Breughels, the Watteaus of national art? But these men did not change the course of succeeding art. Their greatness was not that they were supermen, divinely gifted, creators. They were seers, prophets. Their ears were closer to the ground.

They heard the rumblings clearer. They felt more deeply. They saw farther. They lived closer to the heart of humanity. They were simpler men, purer Florentines, sincerer Flemings, more sympathetic French. They were the voices who cried out the soul strivings of their fellow countrymen. They were not overturners of old orders—look at them closely—they did not defy the facts of life; but they were moved more profoundly by the forces which make human life what it is. Thus were they greater than their contemporaries. Thus must all men be who would be great.

But did these men, the great ones of art history, concern themselves with problems of nationalism? The question needs no answer. Did they go to foreign sources for their style? No, all we need do is to point to the Italianate Flemings of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to show once for all that dependence upon a foreign style means death.

Can we not, then, conclude that a nation's art is the unconscious development of a nation's life, and that the more localized a people are and the more closely they cling to their own homesteads, that is to the life which they intimately know, the more characteristic will be their art?

Now, let us review American art. Do we, like the Italians, Flemish, and French, have traditions? Yes, we are not aborigines. We are, for the most part, Englishmen, transplanted as a cultural unit from the Old World to the New. It would be as foolish to separate American art from its background in England as to separate the American language from its English source. But for one hundred years or so our artistic development was arrested, like a transplanted flower, by the change in soil.

What, then, is the character of our tradition? English art, at the time of the settlement of America, was still clinging to Gothic styles. The earliest houses of New England, like the House of Seven Gables, had overhanging storeys and casement windows. But the simplicity and severity necessary for early American homes found its best expression in the English adaptation of the classic, called the Georgian style. We speedily developed an American

architecture, based on English precedent (sometimes on Dutch, and in the extreme south on Spanish) varied in different localities according to climatic conditions. No one denies an American style of architecture. There should be no need for further discussion, and yet it is strange that those who talk of American dependence on European art never take architecture into consideration.

In painting we remained quite English—Dutch in origin, for England learned how to paint from the Dutch. Our earliest painters worth mentioning were either taught by Benjamin West, the president of the British Royal Academy, or came under his influence.

But painting and sculpture suffered a worse blow than that of mere change of scene, an unnatural blow, aimed by religion. Puritanism and Quakerism regarded art as the Evil One to be spurned and kicked. For art they well-nigh stifled the imagination. Portraiture, of a literal kind, alone survived.

When we began to recover from the Puritan's blow early in the nineteenth century, our painting continued to be English. The Hudson River painters, while having no training, were really inspired by Constable; they knew the works of Constable, Cotman, and Crome from engravings. Genre painting also began to flourish, based largely on the works of Morland, who in turn was, by inspiration, Dutch.

But the Hudson River painters paved the way for the *paysage intime* in America. Inness, our first great American painter, went to Barbizon for inspiration—not, however, until he had already quite matured. He went to England, too, and finally to Holland, the home of landscape painting. And it was but natural for him to turn to these sources, for they were one and the same in spirit. The Barbizon painters were led by the example of Bonington and Constable, and these latter by the seventeenth century Dutchmen.

With the lead of Inness, American art developed naturally. Primitive conditions, the struggle with the wilderness, had made Americans observant of nature; they knew her and were interested in her. Alexander Wyant and Homer Martin were thoroughly American. While both came under Barbizon influence, directly or indirectly,

and Martin lived in France, there was nothing in the art of either man of "foreign" character.

Twachtman, Weir, and Murphy continued this tradition. Transient movements of European art did not seriously change them. Murphy may be called a later Barbizon, or a nineteenth century Dutchman, but that does not affect the question. The school of landscape painting which they founded was a logical development, not based on new discoveries, not romantic nor realistic, not devoted to technical considerations of luminism or abstractness, but a direct expression of a frank wholesome love for American scenery and the effect of nature upon the human soul

But the course of American painting did not proceed along an unbroken path. For figure painting there was not at first a strong enough tradition. We began the nineteenth century with genre painting of an anecdotal kind based on the English style of Morland and Wilkie. But English figure painting reached its lowest depths at this period and so we turned to Düsseldorf, as the goal for romantic painting. This led as a natural sequence to Munich, which became the centre for historical painting. But neither the influence of Düsseldorf nor of Munich on American art was permanent. Duveneck and Chase were our two great painters and teachers who were trained at these centers and no one can say they brought the German style to America.

It was Paris which finally wielded the greatest influence on American art. But let us notice that it was not French academicism, or French classicism, which influenced us to any extent, but, instead, French realism or impressionism. I do not infer there was no academic influence, but I believe it is true that this influence, best exemplified in a few mural decorators, has not produced anything of permanent value. It is significant that our students in Paris were impressed more deeply with the realism of Courbet or the naturalism of Manet. Manet went back to Franz Hals for inspiration. The Americans in Paris joined in that movement which was to swing away from influences which they felt antagonistic to their own temperament. Impressionism was another phase of realism, and not exclusively French. It is related that Pissarro said at an exhibition of impressionist work, "If

it had not been for Yongkind, none of us would have been here." There is no doubt but that Americans have adopted impressionism and luminism as forms of expression. But while these methods were thought to be revolutionary forty or fifty years ago, in fact they were not. The misunderstanding was largely due to an ignorance of the old masters, for Breughel, van Goyen, and Vermeer, as well as others (the almost unknown Porcellis is a supreme example) had studied atmosphere and light as successfully as Monet and Pissarro, while Franz Hals and Watteau obtained either by broken color or the direct brush stroke the same spontaneous effect as the impressionists. In adopting these French methods of painting, therefore, American painters were not fleeing from natural influences, and, after all, those technical considerations were not of vital consequence. They interested American painters chiefly because of their national love for light and color.

When we come to French "post-impressionism" and "independence," we are coming too close to our own time to be able to say to what extent these movements are affecting American art. Undoubtedly, they are affecting American art in that they tend to lead us away from the literal to the expression of abstract principles. If I were to give a list of artists whom my readers would accept as true representatives of American art, they would not be called "post-impressionists." I would have to name such men as Bellows, Redfield, Hawthorne, Chauncey F. Ryder, Ben Foster, Victor Higgins, Wayman Adams, Robert Henri, and Robert Spencer.

So much may be said for the influence of tradition on American art. I wonder if it would be possible for me to suggest how we could expect the other great influence to work upon our art, that of climate and conditions of life.

Climate, geographical conditions, have, indeed, already exerted their influence to produce a national art, and, also, because of our great size, to produce local schools. This is fortunate, for as we have seen the chief interest in a national art centers in its local character. Where the winters are severe, we have developed a love for snow scenery which is eminently characteristic. In the southwest we have begun painting the brilliant rocks and sands of Arizona and New

Mexico, while Indian life is affording another field for typical expression. When we consider our youthfulness and optimism, our exuberance, always remarked by foreigners, it is clear our art should and does express this in a love for color and brilliant effects. In this respect Blumenschein and Ufer, Hayley Lever, Gifford Beal, and Folinsbee are characteristically American. Then, also, our country is one of vast distances, lonely wastes, and broad rivers. We love scenes of this kind and we have artists who paint them: John L. Lathrop, Gardner Symonds, Daniel Garber, Chapman, Elmer Schofield, and many others.

In contrast to the wild aspect of American scenery, very characteristic of our country is our industrial development. This has, as it should, forcibly affected our artists. A number of painters are picturing our river fronts piled with shipping, our city streets with their sky scrapers, our railroad yards, our working men busily engaged, and our factories. Some of the artists who are conspicuous in this genre are Joseph Pennell, Leon Kroll, Gifford Beal, Colin Campbell Cooper, and Henry B. Snell. We have also to consider the great interest in other races in this country, for these races are now a part of our life. A few years ago we found pictures of negro life becoming popular. Today our attention is passing toward the west. Not only the Indians have been the subjects of pictures, but also the Chinese and the Pacific Islanders. Perhaps this interest is exotic and not likely to assist in forming a national art, but, even so, it is indicative of our cosmopolitanism, our love for life in every phase.

In portraiture, what should we term American? a predilection, no doubt, for alert types, not for psychologic analysis, nor for meditative study, but for the frank statement of surface facts. As a people we are more like the Venetians than the Florentines, more like the Dutch than the Parisians, loving either wholesome exuberance, rather than intellectual force, or materialistic well-being, rather than spiritual states. Perhaps the character of our patrons is largely accountable for this, the successful men of affairs furnishing the greatest number of commissions. But this is the fact: the American portrait shows chiefly the outward, not the inward, man.

Another characteristic of American art must be mentioned, that which is perhaps as much the result of our history as of our physical condition. The unawakened resources of America have made it possible for the American to develop whatever instincts he had for organization. We have become great organizers, with a love for system and order. This, as we should expect, has been reflected in our art. The tendencies of all our painters is to study first of all composition, to seek design. In painting, whether of landscape or of the figure, we find great decorative quality, the result, always, of good design.

And what is American art not? It is not religious, nor poetic, nor mystical. Sometimes, it is one of these, but by exception. This is a lamentable fact, but I am discussing what American art is, not what it should be. It is hopeful, however, to notice that American art is passing out of a merely realistic stage.

If we sum up our characteristics, we find that we have a love for nature in her various aspects, a love for the wilderness as well as for cultivated fields, but chiefly we love exuberant nature. We are interested in life, in scenes of industry and activity; in portraiture we prefer the captain of industry, the man alert and successful. We find we are not, after all, literal. Nor do we accept life just as it is. We prefer healthy life. There is an absence of morbidity in our art. But we order our life; we compose it decoratively. In this latter respect we have a certain idealism. Above all, we love color and light. We are intensely emotional (and this we do not borrow from any other country nor do we derive it from tradition). Lastly, and most important of all for our art's sake, we are interested in ourselves.

In this last lies our security, our only security, for if artists keep close to life about them, they are bound to be American in spirit. Nothing, therefore, could be more dangerous than for our artists to look to other countries. There is no need for them to do so. Far more need is there for them to be as local as is possible in their study.

Can we not, therefore, on every ground contradict the statement that America must for many years go to Holland and to Italy and, especially, to France for inspiration? I believe we can.